

A TALE OF THULE

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TOGETHER WITH

SOME POEMS

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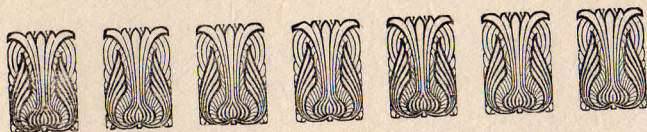
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A TALE OF THULE

I.

A RUMOUR of the Northmen haunted alike the coast and inland country, cropping up from the soil under a variety of forms; here, in an alien place-name; there, in an exotic surname of some long settled family; or, again, in some arresting trait of temperament or physiognomy. The very atmosphere produced a singular impression—the air seemed hardier, and the wind more consistently from the north. Flora and fauna both underwent peculiar modifications; osprey and raven lingered on in pairs, whilst flowering plants, common to the Scandinavian countries, flourished here in patches, painting the drab earth with brilliant tones.

Intermarriage within the confines of the district had largely preserved an individual type; the men, tall, long-limbed, fair to a

degree; blue-eyed and impassive, not to say expressionless, they passed one by, with gaze apparently fixed upon infinity. The women, comely, also of ample build, cleanly, and fruitful mothers. It was significant that any adulteration of the strain was imparted by a woman from the Gaeldacht, such a wife becoming in time merged in the personality of her husband. A case could scarcely be recollected where a woman, born within that vague and indeterminate boundary, had espoused an outland man. Amongst the children, boys predominated, sturdy and self-willed, and, until their sixteenth year, of a bright and healthful beauty. Thereafter, though still handsome, the features became tinged with something sinister and boding.

A concentration of these individual characteristics was to be found at Ragnar's Ness, the straggling collection of spotless, thatched cottages clustered along the low sea-cliffs, amongst which the high-tides washed in winter winds. The ancient cresset of the Vikings still rusted in salty air; fragments of bronze, the blade or haft of weapons, were turned up from time to time in the light porous soil; and where the yellow poppies danced in the sun beside the surf, bleached thigh-bones were

daily disinterred by boys after the bathe—bones, once pillars of the mighty loins from which the lads had, by successive generations, sprung. For the imaginative, wandering the wide waste of sand left by the receding tide, to look seaward was to call up the shield-hung galleys, the sun glinting along their sides.

The primitive road, running inland from the Ness, penetrated a country of desolate monotony, wild tract of heath and furze, varied by low elevation and ravine, or brackish pool, beset with iris-flag and bulrush. To the traveller from the coast, the entire sky-line culminated in a ridge, or cliff, markedly overhung, holding a house within its concave, and crowned by three immemorial pines. The fantastic outline of these, the only trees throughout that country, was visible from all points of the compass; they dominated the landscape, of which they seemed to be the tutelary deities; and their tossing profile, freaked against a smouldering sunset, at times took on an aspect vaguely human—three linked and dancing females, with somewhat of evil abandonment in their steps. The name they went by, that of the three sisters, was singularly fitting: they seemed, in an obscure manner, to preside over the fortunes of that

roof-tree directly beneath them, in the hollow of the cliff. The dwelling was Ragnar's house, rebuilt and altered through the centuries, yet claiming succession from that Ragnar of an early time, first Scandinavian settler upon the coast; reputed planter of the sisters, seedlings brought by him overseas; whose twisted roots, like the locks of the furies, crawled across the mass of overhanging rock, suspended above the house of Ragnar like an imminent catastrophe.

The spot enjoyed a clouded reputation. Tradition associated the founding of the house with more than customary violence. Stragglers from the Ness, in no way superstitious, nevertheless very generally avoided the locality after dark. No wild fowl roosted or nested in the pines, no cattle rested beneath their spreading shade. In summer, the ripened cone pattered in silence from their faintly-swaying summit; in winter, the wind drew from their strained and agonising branches a hideous note, half-weeping and half-laughter, as the three sisters curtsied in a macabre and demoniac dance above the house of Ragnar.

The senior representative of the title, a man far gone in years, resided with his only son,

the mother long since dead. During recent generations the enclosed ground proper to the dwelling had been permitted to revert to the primitive condition of the unproductive wilderness around. The family subsisted upon a few small barques, plying to and fro along the coast, freighted with gravel or stone from some inland quarries. The elder man was now confined to the fireside, the younger, reserved and solitary, divided his time between the house-place and the neighbouring pier-head of the Ness, or accompanied the vessels in their coasting cruises. The only issue of his parents, the continuity of the line depended upon a slender thread, threatened with extinction in the event of his remaining unmarried.

Upon an afternoon of November a girl might be seen approaching the house from a point contrary to the Ness. The rain, persistent and torrential for days, had temporarily ceased: the low vapours, grudgingly lifted from the sky-line, disclosed a long rift of angry light. Her moving figure seemed an integral portion of the sodden waste, without power to alarm the stalking crane, feeding in the swollen pools. Rivulets continually chattered across the track,

necessitating a bound, comparable, in lithe elasticity, to that of a deer. In consequence of this movement her shawl had fallen to her shoulders, disclosing a mass of dark, wavy hair, framing an oval of palest olive, set with large eyes of liquid hazel, and a somewhat wide, yet well-shaped mouth, whose lips, habitually slightly parted, conveyed to the entire face a pleasing aspect of expectancy. Rounding the shoulder of the ridge, which here sank abruptly to the plain, she approached the mouldering fence and half-filled dyke, which, together with a tangle of fuschia bushes, formed the vague limit of the Ragnar property.

The sound produced by her difficulty with the gate brought a very different figure to the threshold. Siegfried the younger was a man yet in the earliest twenties; his head, carried slightly backward, set upon massive shoulders and deepening chest, crowned with a profusion of red-gold hair, conveyed a leonine impression, as of a handsome animal, latently dangerous. His figure, clad in homespun, odorous of the heather, peat, and sea-spray, moved in a lithe and impulsive fashion. His eyes, the most compelling feature of a striking personality, were blue, of varying range of intensity. When the spirit looking through them was

tranquil, they became of the pale, delicate tint of unclouded summer sky; when troubled, the colour deepened through violet to indigo, like the surface of the sea, swept by a sudden squall. Coming to the wicket, and wrenching it open, he caught the girl in his arms, with a gesture violent rather than affectionate.

"How long since your last visit, Maura?" he complained; "I scarcely think you love me as you say. And father becomes bed-ridden: I am alone, from dawn till dusk."

"I might not come before, Siegfried," murmured the girl, disengaging herself from his embrace, and replacing the shawl upon her head, with instinctive modesty. "And, it is in my mind, I may come no more at all."

"You dare not say so," exclaimed Siegfried passionately; "you are promised to me these two years. Are you grown tired of me—or, stay, is there another man? Maura," he whispered, seizing her by the wrist, "say there is no other."

"There is no other," she replied. "Please to let go my wrist—you hurt me. But I am thinking we will not be matched; we are too different; I do not understand you. Siegfried," she continued vehemently, "the stations were at Burriss last week—and you did not come!

Everyone noticed it; I cannot marry a man of whom everybody is talking. And this evening, and I coming here by Clahane cross, I heard a woman say: 'There she goes, to the mad Ragnars again.' You are strange, and this house under the rock is strange, and those three trees are stranger than all. They set me thinking of three wicked-minded old women."

"So people are talking; and I am mad; because I do not tramp to the autumn stations; very good—as for this house, I was born here—and the sisters are part of my life. I prefer these things to a mere slip of an outland girl." He pushed her from him with a sneer, and walked steadily to the house.

Maura stood, her arms gathered cross-wise beneath her neck. Then, uttering a faint cry, she ran after him, through a tangle of hawk-weed and wild scabious. "Siegfried," she sighed, in an intensity of emotion; "Siegfried, I did not mean it! Oh, forgive me, love me—kiss me!"

He gathered her to his breast like a flower, almost bruising her mouth by the passion of his lips. "Come within; father is above in the bed; I fear he is unlikely to leave it again. We will be quite alone."

The living-room, which they entered, ran

the entire length of the house-place, heavily timbered as to the low ceiling, and panelled in the walls. The huge, open hearth enjoyed the proportions of an ordinary-sized room, the heavy oak settles and table being drawn within its embrasure. The staircase ascended to a trap, giving direct access to the upper floors. A single window, opposite to the entrance, opened upon the cliff-face, barely allowing of a glimmer of light. Some gun-racks, with cases of mounted wild-fowl, lined the walls. Fishing baggage, farm implements, oars, and sailcloths thrust in confusion amongst the rafters, with a few worn skins laid upon the square stone flags, completed a sombre but picturesque interior. Siegfried drew her to the fire, seating himself beside her, throwing an arm across her shoulders. There was silence for a time between them, broken at intervals by the clicking logs upon the hearth, or the metallic chirp of crickets from the overhanging chimney-throat.

The girl stirred, drew down his hand in both her own, resting her head against his breast. "Siegfried," she murmured drowsily, "in what do you believe?"

"In you," he replied lightly, bending until his eyes were mirrored in her own.

"I know," she replied, restlessly; "but it is of a different belief I am thinking. Is there nothing outside of you, nothing invisible, that draws your soul out of itself?"

The cold china-blue eyes deepened to the tint of sea, swelling before the storm. "Aye," he said, "there is something, but it is a thing you could not understand."

"Tell me," she pleaded, nestling closer. "Tell me; a pity it would be, there to be anything between us."

"It is a thing that pervades all this wild country," said Ragnar, slowly, his gaze fixed upon vacancy. "When winter storms awaken, and the wild swan travels to the south upon wide-spread wings, I feel it very strongly. Or at sea, when the ship runs free before the gale, with waves awash about the prow, it is close to me. And when my father speaks to me of days long dead, of the coming of the Gall to this country of the Gael, it stirs along my veins like wine. When I go walking alone for miles across the moors, the broken light and darkness of the chasing sky tell me of it; and when I sit alone here, far into the night, beside the fire, I hear it crying in the chimney. I hear it now," he concluded quietly.

From the rere of the house there rose up a

wailing cry, melancholy and mirthful at once, swelling to a note of triumph, sobbing again to silence in the hollow cliff. Maura half started from his arms. "That is an evil sound," she said hoarsely. "What thing is it that makes it? Siegfried, I am afraid."

"It is the sisters; the wind is rising in their branches, and striking the face of the rock. You should hear them in a storm; the house shakes and echoes to their continual crying. Often I cannot sleep because of it; but I love it, even as a little boy I loved it. It tells me things."

"What things?" she whispered, looking fearfully into the strange, impassive face.

"Violent things; long, dangerous voyages, ending in wild landings upon desolate coasts; burnings and battles; the killing of men and carrying off of women."

"Those cannot be wholesome thoughts to have. Oh, Siegfried, I could never live here! Promise me to leave it, when we marry. Let us go west into Burris, where the green fields are; this place seems haunted."

"My people built this house many and many a year ago; they have lived here for countless generations. I myself have been born beneath this roof; beneath it I shall die, in the great

carved four-poster, where my fathers have died before me."

"Then you cannot love me," urged the girl; "if you loved me you would never be wishful to have me living where I might never be happy. I will leave you, Siegfried Ragnar, to go home to my own people."

"Let you go, then, Maura Douras," he said mockingly; "it is not I who keep you."

She rose at his words, taking a step to leave the hearth-place. But a sudden, vibrant note of menace, dwindling to a whisper of peevish anger, drove her to his arms again, cowering upon his breast, as a storm-beaten bird. The sisters spoke anew, gathering strength from a growing wind.

"Maura," said Ragnar, suddenly, after a silence of close upon a quarter of an hour, "marry me in spring. Father will hardly last out the winter."

"Why need we marry? I am content to stay the way we are; I have all that I want," she sighed, stirring in his arms like a sleepy child.

"What I have not—Maura, I want you for my own." He bent above her until the red-gold hair blent with the glossy black.

"Very well," she breathed, struggling

faintly to disengage herself. "But now I must be going; aunt will be wondering."

Without, the wreckage of the sky, cleared before a shouting south-west wind, laden with warm, moist odours. Tattered masses of vapour went streaming to the coast, shot with colour from the level sun. A flock of curlew whistled slant-wise down the wind. Innumerable bog-pools quivered with a tremulous image of the flying glory overhead. As she struck the homeward track, the girl, looking backward, his kiss warm upon her mouth, beheld the figure of Siegfried Ragnar bathed in the blood-red of a double sunset, and, above him, the three sisters, mopping and mowing in a strengthening gale.

II.

THE elder Ragnar lingered until the following January, burning lower and lower like a lamp. With his approaching end the gales attained an unprecedented violence. Great clots of spume, carried from the coast-line, clung to the house-front, or fell among the tortured fuschias. The sisters yelled and swayed, the

wind thundered in the hollow rock. The rain-storm swept along the ridges in serried phalanxes, and, when the blast lulled, the pauses filled with a hoarse undertone from whitening leagues of sea. Under the strain of watching and the influence of the weather, Siegfried slept but little, sitting by the bed-head the greater part of the night. The mutual relations, always reserved, showed little sign of softening or expansion under the imminent shadow of death; with the performance of a few simple duties from time to time the claims of father upon son appeared to be satisfied.

The room in which the dying man lay was at the rere, the window facing upon the sisters, the sill upon a level with the summit of the cliff. Upon the final night the storm, subsiding somewhat, permitted glimpses of a full moon, riding high among the flying rack, filling the apartment with a rout of shadows, predominant amongst them the fantastic shapes cast by the flogging pines. The comparative quiet caused Siegfried to fall into a doze, from which he partly recovered, under a vague impression that the room had become peopled with additional and malignant presences. A peculiar odour pervaded the atmosphere, the salt tang of the sea, with a sickly pungency,

as of blood. Three swirling columns of vapour seemed to rise in a fume about the bed-foot, towering to the ceiling, steadying into spectral female form. Starting fully awake, the spiral wraiths dwindled to the floor and vanished; turning to the bed, the frozen mask of his father, whitened and darkened beneath the flitting shadow of the clouds. The storm, gathering fresh vigour, drummed in redoubled fury upon the walls; without, the sisters danced an obscene saraband, emitting a note of unhuman exultation, fearfully mingled with the utter dereliction of the damned.

III.

WHEN his father lay two months underground, Siegfried Ragnar set forth to redeem the promise of Maura Douras. The morning wore that delicate aspect of anticipated summer, frequently unfulfilled when the actual season arrived; the clouds drawn off upon every side, lay banked in brooding clusters along the level sky-line. A couple of blackbirds chattered in the fuschia-bushes, fussing over the preliminaries of nest-building. Even the sisters

wore a chastened, almost a benign demeanour. Taking an ashplant from behind the door, which he locked, Siegfried strode away across the waste, bareheaded, and regardless of the prickly scrub, clothed as he was in high-laced, leathern gaiters, with breeches of stoutest frieze. He moved steadily forward, indifferently crushing under foot the coarser herbage, or fragile tuft of harebell, akin in colour to the sky.

The monotony of the country was such that at the end of half-an-hour he appeared to be still moving in the same spot; perspective was afforded by the sisters, who, now of reduced dimensions, were relieved against the eastern cloud-bank. The ground began presently to slope appreciably; bushes of holly and broom studded the bloomless heath, and patches of turf appeared, in brilliant alternation to the dun soil. A cock-crow came up suddenly in the keen and quiet morning air; the verge of the moor fell away abruptly in a loose sandy cliff, descending to fertile pasture, sprinkled with farmsteads, and diversified by thickets of young trees.

Scrambling down the face of the sand-bank, Siegfried struck into a sheep-track crossing a field, which terminated in a trim green

paling, enclosing an old-fashioned garden, containing lichen-coated apple-trees, beneath which innumerable daffodils trembled in an otherwise imperceptible breeze. A cobbled pathway crossed this little garth to the house, a two-storied lime-washed building, with mullioned windows. Formerly a manse or glebe, in the days of a prosperous ascendancy, in course of time it had passed as a farmstead into the hands of the original occupiers of the soil, personified at present by Bridget Cantwell, Maura's widowed aunt. Leaning across the closed half-door, Siegfried beheld the woman of the house, bread-making. Unaware of his presence she continued to thump the dough vigorously for some moments; raising her head, to shake back a lock of hair, she saw him, and started slightly.

"Good day to you," said Siegfried briefly. "Is Maura within?"

"Good morning, Mr. Ragnar," she answered, with veiled hostility in her tones. "Maura is below with the fowl." She returned to her work forthwith.

He left the door abruptly, turned the right-hand corner of the building, passing the byre, whence issued a pleasing reek, with a steady munch of mangolds. Before him lay a broad

pasture, dotted with white Wyandottes, the figure of Maura Douras moving amongst them like a presiding goddess amongst her worshippers. These same, with a fickleness characteristic of any body of self-interested devotees, catching sight of Siegfried, streamed across the field, under the impression that he would provide them with newer gustatory sensations. Surprised at this desertion, the girl looked to ascertain the cause; in a moment she was following the flock with even greater precipitancy.

A lovers' meeting was prevented by the Wyandottes, who continued to surge and scuffle around Siegfried. Catching a handful of grain from her apron, Maura flung it as far as possible behind her; a stampede automatically following, the pair were free to approach one another.

"Maura," he said presently, "you must know why I have come. Father is dead, and there is nothing to hinder our marriage."

"Siegfried, I am wishful to keep my word—indeed, I am. But I dread leaving Burris to go live at the Ness. Would you not live here with me, in the sweet and open country?"

"You must know that to be impossible. Your aunt dislikes me; even if she did not, it

would be unbecoming in a man to live with his wife's people."

"The house below us is for sale; the Joyces are gone away—would you not think well of taking it, Siegfried?" pleaded the girl.

"Where would I find money? I am rent-free at home; moreover, the boats compel me to live nearer to the sea than here. Maura, do not disappoint me, keep faith with me; remember, I am the last of my line, and, if I should have no son, the family is gone."

She reddened, over throat and temples, to the tips of either ear. "That's not a decent way to speak to me," she complained. "You are thinking only of yourself in all this business. I am to give everything, and what is it I am to get? I am to leave home, aunt, all that I have lived with, and love, to go to you, so that—so that——" she broke into a passion of weeping. Siegfried continued to regard her with imperturbable enigmatic masculinity, in virtue of which he exerted over her the powerful influence he did. "I thought you loved me," he remarked coldly "If you have changed your mind, I'll not compel you." He turned slowly upon his heel.

At hint of this desertion Maura capitulated at once. "No, no, Siegfried," she pleaded,

pathetically; "I will do as you wish." And at the sign of unqualified submission he smiled and kissed her.

Mrs. Cantwell had few observations to make. Although pregnant with disapproval, she did not feel entitled to place any obstacle in Maura's path, never having been formally appointed her guardian, and considering the girl to be of an age to decide for herself. Arrangements were made for the marriage a month from thence, the ceremony to take place at the neighbouring town of Bruffree. The night preceding Siegfried and the two women drove over in a quaint and antiquated vehicle, the property of the former. Next day the three repaired to the Dominican church for the wedding, Siegfried looking strangely alien to the atmosphere of the edifice, in a new, navy-blue outfit of somewhat nautical lines. Man and wife proceeded immediately to the little town of Courtmills for a brief honeymoon; and, a few weeks later, Maura Ragnar, her fears asleep for the moment, and hope at its highest, crossed her husband's threshold, to take up residence as mistress of Ragnar's house.

IV.

THROUGHOUT the summer following, under the double influence of brilliant weather and the warm afterglow of marriage, Maura remained happy. Her will had not, as yet, come into direct conflict with her husband's, a circumstance which conveyed a deceptive impression of unanimity. The long days were largely spent without-doors; Siegfried, having found a capable overseer for the barques, was free to lay out a little flower-garden for her within the house precincts. This occupied much of their time, the remainder being passed in wandering upon the surrounding waste, or in day-long visits to the Ness, when Maura would sit dreaming upon the beach, while Siegfried struck out to sea in a long, steady swim. Sunday Mass being out of the question in that isolated country, he had promised to attend the next stations at Burris—and with this undertaking she was content. Circumstances conspired to prevent her recognition of the fact that the mutual relations owed much of their tranquillity to their comparative superficiality.

About the autumnal equinox, with the slow darkening of the face of Nature, preparatory to the setting in of the winter peculiar to that country, she became unwell. Fits of restlessness alternated with depression and vague foreboding. In spirit she seemed to turn from Siegfried in search of an affection less masculine and more maternal. Her thoughts dwelt much upon her mother, whom she had never seen. Waking frequently in the small hours, to hear the regular breathing of her husband beside her, was to become afflicted with a sense of helplessness before some obscure catastrophe. The bedroom, at a lower level to that in which the elder Ragnar died, was completely overshadowed by the cliff, whose overhanging face, surmounted by the pines, appeared to press in upon her like a tragic destiny.

At her earnest request, Mrs. Cantwell came across to spend some days. Siegfried, while taking little trouble to conceal his dislike of her arrival, did not oppose it, inasmuch as he was urgent to have certain personal suspicions confirmed. Her aunt came, and made her diagnosis without delay. Siegfried was overjoyed—yet with something vaguely brutal in his pleasure. That evening, as the two sat

within the chimney, Maura having retired early, pleading fatigue, Bridget Cantwell unmasked her batteries for the struggle.

"Maura is wishful to come home to me till the child is born," she began. "I cannot wait on here—and a woman should be beside her."

"No Ragnar was ever born outside of Ragnar's house," Siegfried replied curtly.

"It is giving the child a bad chance, and a bad start, for it to be born here; Maura does not like the house—she is fretting and unhappy—and as the mother is, in the last months, so must be the child."

He smiled coldly upon her. "There are two partners to be considered in this, as in every birth. No son of mine can be either weak or peevish."

"Son," she ejaculated angrily; "how sure you are of a boy! A fit judgment upon you if it were to be a girl!"

"Yes," he replied, with deepening eyes, "I believe that I have begotten a son; and I will have that son come into the world within the sound of the sea, under this ancient roof-tree, and beneath the shadow of the branches of the three sisters."

A light wind, born of the sunset, swayed the pine-tops as he spoke, filling the shadows

with a titter of malice. Too indignant at his assurance to trust herself to speech, the aunt returned to Burris the following day, a promise having been made upon both sides; upon theirs, that when matters became urgent they would send for her; upon hers, that she would then come without delay.

Until a week before Christmas, when the weather rendered out-of-doors impossible, Maura spent much of her time walking up and down along the ridge, even, in a fitful gleam of sun, sitting, wrapped up, beneath the pines. Her eyes were continually turned to the west, her mind fixed upon Burris. Siegfried came up to her from time to time, but she found his physical vigour and overpowering personality somewhat disturbing. The long-delayed gales arrived at last, rendered the more destructive for their postponement. Confined to the house-place, her ill-defined apprehensions awoke anew. The whole surrounding storm-beaten waste seemed up in arms against her; above all, the sisters howled an unspeakable menace. In time the three became endowed with human personality, each, to her fevered imagination, possessed of incredible personal hostility. About this time, her husband withdrawing to the room containing the great ancestral four-

poster, she henceforth was alone throughout those hours when the disordered elements attained their supreme intensity. One night towards two o'clock, when the sisters executed an insane Walpurgis dance without the windows, Siegfried was wakened out of a profound sleep by a series of piercing screams, audible even above wind and rain. Dragging his garments upon him, he rushed to Maura's room. The night-light was extinguished in the draught caused by the open door, but not before he caught sight of his wife fallen in a faint at the bed-foot. Raising her in his arms, she recovered whilst being carried to the bed; violently resisting his attempts to lay her down, clinging to him like a creeper to a tree.

"The sisters," she muttered, "the sisters! Oh, my husband, do not leave me! They will come again to me—those terrible women, with their horrible odour!"

"What women, Maureen, my own," he murmured. "I am with you, and I alone."

"They came through the window, out of the trees," she gasped, "three ugly, tall old women. They stood round the bed, chattering to one another. They said that it was the bane of Ragnar that I should bear no man-child, but that I should die! Oh, Siegfried, my husband,

I can give you no son—and I must die—my husband, we should never have married—they said so, the sisters said so! They spoke of oil and water, as well might the Gael hope to mingle with the Gall! I wish I was a child again, in the green fields of Burris—I wish much that I had never come to Ragnar's house!"

She broke into a paroxysm of weeping, fell from that to laughter, then into a condition of collapse. Completely shaken from his composure, Siegfried held her in his arms till dawn, covering her face with kisses, mingled with tears, the first he had ever shed. At day-break she fell into a doze; he laid her down gently, and descended to the door in a blind instinct for assistance. By good luck one of the quarry carts with its horse and driver stood without in the half-light, coming from the Ness. Bidding him dismount, Ragnar dispatched him upon foot to Burris for Mrs. Cantwell. By mid-day she had returned. When the sun sank in a wealth of vapour behind the pines, Maura was delivered of a fragile female child, surviving its birth by but an hour.

V.

MAURA recovered slowly with the spring, slowly, but not completely. She was as a sapling, over whose slender stem some heavy weight had passed; the pressure removed, the sapling still lived on; but the direction of its growth was irretrievably altered—it bowed its branches to the ground, no longer lifting them to the sun. A change was evident in Siegfried also. His features wore a softened outline, his eyes were more submissive. Inwardly he held himself to account for the tragedy which had taken place; he felt bitter remorse for his obstinacy in repulsing Maura's request to live elsewhere, inconvenient though such an arrangement must have been—not to say impossible; he was tortured by the belief that, had the birth taken place at Burris, the child would have lived, and might—such was his ignorant simplicity—have proved to be a boy. He devoted all his available time to Maura, who in return exhibited a quiet and thankful tenderness; yet he could not fail to perceive that the earlier passion was gone.

One evening in early May, about sunset, when the level rays from the west were filled with a premature cloud of midges, he came slowly to where she was seated in the garden-patch designed for her in that first flush of marriage. She sat, her head leaning against the high chair-back, watching his approach through half-closed lids. He held something in his arms, which he laid gently in her lap. It was a leveret, lost by its mother on the moor. Maura bent above it, the flanks quivering, and great eyes dilating with fear. Her hands trembled, her mouth shook. Siegfried knelt beside her, and, as once before, her dark hair was mingled with his own, burning like a flame in the sunset; in the shadow of their hair their mouths met in a gentle pressure, like the kiss of innocent children.

"Siegfried," she said, with low, tremulous utterance, "I have been punished. I understand now how it is that a woman can love in two ways, with her mind, or with"—she hesitated slightly—"or with something that is not her mind."

"Dear heart of mine," he murmured, "that was all my fault. I have always been violent; now it will be different; we have many years of peace before us."

"I do not think it," she replied, in a low, steady tone. "Siegfried, I am wishful for something; will you not grant it to me?"

"Anything," he whispered, pressing his cheek against hers.

"Siegfried, you remember that night when I cried out, and you came to me; that was no dream I had; I saw those fearful women as clearly as I am seeing you. Always, since I first came to know you, I had been afraid of the trees; as a child, people in Burris would be talking of the sisters—it was the fear of them that kept me from coming to you more often—and a dread of them made me wish to be living with you in Burris. Siegfried, there is an evil thing in each one of the sisters, and because of them there is a shadow on Ragnar's house."

He was silent, remembering the half-waking dream he had the night his own father died, to which, with the pronounced objectivity of his nature, he had hardly paid any consideration until now.

"What are you wishing of me?" he enquired, huskily.

"To cut down the sisters," she replied quietly, laying both her delicate hands upon his own rough ones.

"Impossible," he cried, starting to his feet. "Maura, I dare not."

"You have promised to give me my wish," she said weakly. "You asked a thing of me, the only thing I had to call my own; I gave it to you, I gave my life to you—and it is broken, and I am thinking it may not be mended; you have refused me the only thing I have ever asked of yourself. It is the same always between man and woman."

"Maureen, my own, it is not for myself, but because of my father, and of his father again, and away back through the years past, that I dare not do this thing. These three trees are held in our family to have been planted by a Ragnar who came to this coast centuries ago; he brought them with him out of Norway, and set them up there above his house, three little seedlings, to recall his ancient home. If they fall, the house of Ragnar falls, and the family is no more."

She rose at his words, moving quietly to the house. He followed her within to the hearth-place, where she stood looking down into the white ash of smouldering peats. Turning from the chimney, she made to ascend the ladder-stair to the upper floor. At its

foot she stopped, facing him, with a strange light upon her face.

"Siegfried," she said, in the same steady voice as formerly; "I love you, and because of that I have denied you nothing, but because of that I am about to deny you now. Let you not come to me so long as the shadow of the trees lies between us." She slowly mounted the stair-way and passed out of his eyes.

Siegfried Ragnar climbed the sloping shoulder of the ridge and stood below the pines. The vault was powdered far and wide with stars; to the south, Orion heaved his bearers above the horizon, dogged by Sirius, burning with a steel-blue flame. Bats flickered about his face with tenuous cry. What mystery was hidden amongst those branches, in what religious rites had they taken root? Was that strange emotion under whose influence he had grown to manhood an evil thing—that unconscious worship of energy in all its forms? The delight in Nature in her most desolate aspects, and in the destructive elements of storm—might this not have birth in some remote generation of his ancestors, transmitted to successive ages through the medium of the sisters? That spirit set him

apart from his fellows, striving to overcome all dissimilar temperaments with which it came in contact. It had done so with Maura, it had crushed her. She, springing from a gentler stock, had looked but for love; he had inflicted upon her the cruelty of passion. . . . He remembered their first meeting . . . he was only sixteen . . . she had come far up the moor, in search of a stray goat, and had sprained her ankle . . . how sweet and healthy she seemed then . . . and now! Yes, her claim was justified. The sisters embodied a power antagonistic to her, a quality bent upon her destruction; it was but due to her that they should fall. And with their fall that invisible barrier would be removed, and his spirit be united to hers. He buried his face in his hands, praying blindly, inarticulately, to some absolute being beyond himself—not that undisciplined ecstasy of which he had told Maura—but a being now for the first time clearly envisaged, an image of love, as refracted through the medium of his wife. The penetrating cold of the small hours passed above his head unheeded; the day-spring rippled up through rifts of amber light; he descended from the ridge, his face drenched with tears, his hair and limbs soaked

with dew, and moved slowly away towards the Ness, with eyes lifted to the flaming aureole of the east.

An hour or two later something in the nature of a small procession might be seen approaching Ragnar's house. Siegfried came first, leading a horse harnessed to a bright-coloured farm cart, across which were strapped a couple of long ladders, with ropes and two-handled saws within the well. A body of men straggled behind. The cart was unloaded below, the contents carried to the summit of the ridge. Two men ascended the first tree by means of the ladder, to fasten the ropes to the higher branches; these were then carried by others in a westerly direction, and held taut, so that the pine should fall away from the house and the edge of the cliff. The saw was placed across the bole a few feet from its base, and the stillness was broken by a harsh rhythmical stridor. Siegfried, having regarded the process for a few moments with an inscrutable countenance, turned and walked away. Presently a ripping, cracking sound compelled him to turn against his will; the majority of the men were now clustered at the rope's end, straining heavily upon it. The great pine yielded, heeled over, then recovered

herself, dragging the men violently in her recoil. She swayed again; the few undivided inches of her girth parted with a sound like a pistol shot; leaving the rope, the men ran for safety from the impending fall. The first of the sisters tottered for an instant, then fell slowly and majestically to earth, sending a smoke of withered heath-bells, twigs, and fir-cones far into the ringing air.

A spasm crossed Siegfried's face; as work was commenced upon the second, the place appeared to him to present an aspect of desecration, almost of sacrilege. The middle sister proved stubborn to a degree; the men sweated and cursed in the struggle to overcome her; great goutts of resin oozed from the bark-pores like blood; when she had fallen with a groan the disturbance of her roots sent a patter of stones from the cliff-face upon the roof of Ragnar's house.

After a mid-day meal, taken in the house-place, the men suggested leaving the last pine-tree until the morrow. Siegfried strenuously resisting this proposal, they returned to work with indifferent grace. From sulkiness, this final destruction was delayed throughout the afternoon; it was only at sunset that, the labour completed, they withdrew in a body to the

Ness, leaving Siegfried standing beside the ruin of the trees. An universal silence obtained, in which Nature seemed to contemplate the spectacle of havoc with horror : silence rendered more intense by the absence of the faint sigh audible in the pines even upon days of extreme calm.

Strangely weak and broken, he stumbled from the ridge, remembering now that he had not seen Maura throughout the day. His virility seemed fallen from him; he longed for her, with the piteous yearning of a child for the shelter of a mother's arms. As he staggered slightly in the garden-path he saw her standing above him in the door frame. He held out his hands to her, calling to her in a cracked and piteous voice.

"Maura," he whispered, as she took him to her arms and drew him within the house; "Maura, it is done; I have no wish now but for you."

The closing hours of that day were crowned for both by that calm which comes of perfect mutual comprehension; they were not occupied with the ravaged past, nor troubled by anticipations of a darkened future; for an immortal hour they lived, looking into the mutual mirror held up to them by love. But in the night,

as they lay together, sleeping like tired children, the sisters were avenged; the overhanging rock, around which their roots had interlaced throughout the centuries, loosened by the violence of the previous day, descended in a precipitate landslide; and in the morning it was noised about the countryside that, with the passing of the three sisters, Ragnar's house had perished.

